

Book Review: On the Universal: the uniform, the common and dialogue between cultures by François Jullien

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On the Universal sees **François Jullien** focus on whether universal values exist and whether dialogue between cultures is possible. The book retraces the history of the concept of the universal from its invention as an aspect of Roman citizenship, through its neutralization in the Christian idea of salvation, to its present day manifestations. This is a valuable contribution to the field, writes **Josh Jowitt**.

On the Universal: the uniform, the common and dialogue between cultures.
François Jullien. Polity. 2014.

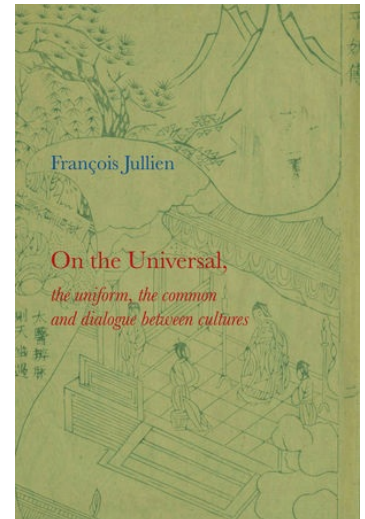
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One of the most controversial ideas of Human Rights philosophy is that of their underlying universality; ever since the first proclamations of the [Rights of Man](#) arose in the eighteenth century, theorists have struggled to reconcile their theoretical optimism with cultural and political realities. It is into this maelstrom that French Sinologist François Jullien, professor at the Universit Paris-Diderot and a member of the Institut universitaire de France, has enthusiastically thrown himself.

Although originally published in French in 2008, this is the first time the book has been translated into English. It takes an unashamedly postmodern swipe at the idea that values can ever be truly universal, claiming the *a-priori* universality invoked by many advocates of Human Rights is a fallacy which is completely inapplicable to anything which can be meaningfully observed as 'human'. Jullien begins his attack by taking us on a historical journey of how he believes the ideas of 'the universal' and 'the common' have evolved in Western thought; in case this distinction appears artificial, he helpfully defines them for us. The common is a state which slowly emerges through the violence of history, whereas the universal is located on a higher operative level of pure knowledge. It is this ideal which Jullien believes to be false. He proposes that Socrates reshaped Western thought to emphasise the idea of the universal; this means that universalism cannot be refuted by Western logic, as it is fundamentally built into our thought systems.

Jullien proceeds to attempt to locate this inescapable universalism in other periods of Western history and also non-Western cultures. He perceives this search to be fruitless; universalism, he claims, is only prevalent in European thought due to the continent's historical pluralism and need to form a cohesive whole. Universalism is an aim and an aspiration which constantly seeks incarnation, not a concrete and identifiable means of structuring society. Julien identifies other societies which lack this emphasis on attempting to locate the universal, which separate universality of logic from values in a way that Europe does not; notably Indian and Islamic philosophies. He believes these philosophies are still universalising in their own way (in that by attempting to escape their structures one recognises and perpetuates their existence), but observes that they do not attempt to spread their message in a European fashion; both see themselves as 'other', and are happy to remain that way.

How, then, can dialogue occur between such philosophies to attempt to locate a potential universal? Jullien concedes that to deny universality is a dangerous nod to relativism and neo-colonialism, but holds the endeavour would be extremely difficult from a European philosophical perspective as we are only capable of addressing alternate philosophies using the mind-set of our own – rendering the endeavour self-defeating. Yet how do we reconcile that many minorities still recognise the emancipatory power of universal Human Rights and value their



inherently subversive nature?

We are told the answer may be discovered in comparisons with China – a society historically isolated from Western thought but still recognisable as sophisticated and coherent. China historically saw its civilisation as self-evidently universal, and did not need to justify this in the European tradition. Yet such comparisons bring their own difficulties, notably though ambiguities in the translation of concepts between languages. Jullien gives the example of the Chinese word '*zhen*'; translating this as '*truth*' which ascribes a universalising quality absent in the original language. Jullien therefore dismisses any search for universalism which takes place through assimilation of concepts as cheap and meaningless.

Where does this leave Human Rights? Jullien sees them as particularly problematic given their claim to self-evident universality despite being fundamentally grounded in Western history. He believes the fact that early Human Rights instruments, notably the French *Déclaration des Droits de l'Homme et du Citoyen* of 1789, changed so frequently in the years following their enactment suggests that there is no Universalism within such a culturally grounded notion. Even the name of the phenomenon, he suggests, is grounded in a double Western abstraction of '*human*' and '*right*' which does not clearly translate into other philosophies. A more valuable discourse would be one of *universalism* more broadly; such nomenclature recognises the fluidity and aspirational nature of the Human Rights Project as opposed to fixing it as an artificial and backwards looking universal. Yet even this draws Jullien to a cynical conclusion – that too often negotiation is doomed to failure, as it is in the very nature of values that they are uncompromising in their content.

Despite presenting a thoughtful dialogue on the topic, Jullien's ideas are not without their problems. In true postmodern style the text is extremely dense and at times appears to border on being deliberately obfuscatory so as to hide the philosophical emptiness of certain observations, notably the repeated empirical observations he attempts to draw from Greco-Roman and Christian history. There are also some downright bizarre analogies, for example, an altarpiece in Ghent painted by the Van Eyck brothers makes multiple appearances in the text for no discernible reason other than that the author wishes us to know he is aware of it.

As somebody who would broadly describe themselves as Kantian, I am also perplexed as to how Jullien manages to mention Kant's writings only a handful of times in an almost two-hundred page-long study on comparative universalism. The blasé claims that Kantian thought can be dismissed as Eurocentric, or that *a-priori* universalism cannot hold in the face of widespread disagreement to the principles claimed, make no attempt to seriously engage with any of Kant's arguments – a gap which is extremely notable by its absence. I was at times reminded of the quip about the philosopher who blindly claims "All truth is relative – fact." without being aware of the paradox this statement contains.

This aside, Jullien's work makes a valuable contribution to the field. The controversies he identifies are only going to become more deep-set in our increasingly multi-polar world, and given the current geo-political climate we need more than ever to agree on the role that universal Human Rights may play in an increasingly globalised world.

Josh Jowitt is second year PhD Candidate at Durham Law School, studying the ever-controversial link between law and morality. He is particularly interested in the theories of John Rawls and Alan Gewirth. He also leads tutorials and seminars in Public Law modules at both Durham and Newcastle Universities. [Read more reviews by Josh.](#)

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